Curt McDowell & Nuclear Family Fallout

by Jenny Shepherd

A few months after I'd come to America and found its mainstream sexual conventions summed up by joke stores selling overpriced plastic spiders, false noses and laughter machines, I met Curt McDowell at a party. He looked as if he had it in him to trash a lot of joke stores. When I saw his films Confessions, Nudes: A Sketchbood and *Ronnie* awhile later, it was clear he did.

If you divide Curt McDowell's films into meditations, satires, low comedies and unique oddities, *Confessions*, *Nudes* and *Ronnie* all fall within the meditation category. That's not to say they're slow, esoteric or incomprehensible, but rather that they are expressions of someone facing and acknowledging his own impulses, predilictions and actions, real or imagined.

In *Ronnie*, the camera moves smoothly over a young man's body, discovering it as a lover would and catching images of him in a sunny room. On the soundtrack, Ronnie relates the story of his encounter with Curt in a careless monotone. It's a whore's story. Sex for money, money for sex. The camera's vision is as sensual as Ronnie is mechanical. For awhile I hate Ronnie and his self-description as a macho man who balls women and lets himself be used by gay men for money. Then the poverty of his situation defuses his offhanded attempt to humiliate the man who has bought his body for a few hours and who records the transaction on film. *Ronnie* has much to say in its eleven minutes about both sexual relationships between a straight stud and an almost self-punishing gay man and the buying and selling of sex.

Nudes is one of McDowell's most satisfying and complete films. Perhaps it's here that he's discovered the format that suits him best. It's a series of twelve vignettes, symbolic and dream-like miniature portraits. The film begins with George languishing his handsome, scantily-clad body on the banks of a mountain stream; he proceeds to get what he's asking for, in teasing close-up. What follows is an individual's fantasies turned into a film that, in turn, acquires the truth and appearance of dreams. Like vignettes, each sketch fades out of and back into blank ground. They are disturbing, erotic, funny, at times reassuring, clinical and more.

Curt McDowell has been making 16mm films for ten years now. In the early 70s he was prolific, making films like *Visit to Indiana*, *Confessions*, *Boggy Depot*, *Peeing into the Wind*, *Tasteless Trilogy* (a forerunner to *Nudes* that was hissed and booed by the audience when it showed at MOMA in New York, of which McDowell now says, "It embarrassed me," but I like it a lot), *Naughty Words*, *A Night with Gilda Peck* (which Curt summarizes as, "Interesting format but terrible execution; a Kuchar-colored musical about a woman who tries hard and doesn't quite make it."), *Siamese Twin Pinheads* (in the category of the uniquely odd . . . the nun is wonderful), *Nozy Tozy*, *True Blue and Dreamy* (fits all categories), *Ronnie*, *Nudes*, *Weiners and Buns Musical* and *Thundercrack*. Then, from the mid-70s until last year, he laid low. Now he's in the final stages of editing a new movie in two parts: *Taboo: The Single and the LP* and *Taboo: An Exhibition*.

In this amalgamated culture that belongs to everyone and no one, people are more than usually confused and disoriented. The media provide sign posts and bearings. People are fed "normal" behavior. TV validates certain ways of acting and instills attitudes and expectations. America has too discontinuous and too demanding a culture in real life for most people to absorb workable life patterns from it. The melting pot syndrome. But without acceptable usable cultural patterns, life is in the dark and one finds one's way, at best, by starlight and by the touch and kindness of strangers. It's difficult to

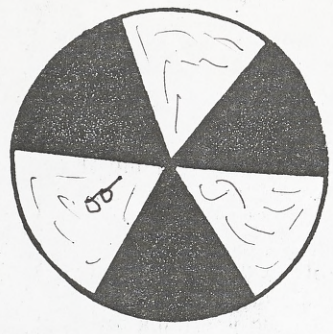
George Kuchar and Marion Eaton in Thundercrack.

stay properly in debt living that way, and, anyway, most people aren't moved by the fact that their society is only one of many possible collective realities. If it's impossible to live in, well, you have to rely on a little programming. TV is perfect for that, as are Hollywood and Warner Bros. and EMI and the whole art establishment and entertainment industry. "I came, I saw, I was programmed" is the immigrant's litany that gives the lie to the dreams of freedom from cultural oppression that drove people here in the first place.

His early movies, *A Visit to Indiana* and *Confessions* and *Boggy Depot*, reflect life in 50s Indiana. *A Visit to Indiana* is a flickering montage of white-edge shots of Lafayette with a voice-over dialogue between an avuncular type and a reluctant, monosyllabic Curt McDowell who is being quizzed on his visit to his family. "There's a lot of eating in the Midwest." "Everybody's fat." It's bleak and funny—people living static survival lives in the suburbs. "Marcy. She's a beautiful girl. How is she?" "She's fat." "What does she do?" "She cooks a lot." In *Boggy Depot*, the Mean Brothers conspire as high camp/low comic villains to hypnotize an unsuspecting man to fall in love. The resulting satire on heterosexual love fantasy cliches is like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; remember, the Queen of the Fairies is slipped a love potion and falls drastically in love with a bumbling ham actor dressed up as a donkey.

In the early 70s, McDowell was first George Kuchar's student and later collaborator; they worked together on a number of films. They both have in common a dreamy lure and expressiveness in black and white film. The main Kuchar influence on McDowell seems to be the use of traditional Hollywood cinematic conventions, which he twists as comment on the ersatz world of early post-World War II America. At that time, the media's line was that sex didn't exist except as it was sublimated into consumption and commodity fetishism. A whole generation of American films and TV series (like *Leave it to Beaver*) presented the official puritanical myth of the normal American family. Curt McDowell brought to his filmmaking a desire to strip 50s soap opera characters naked and expose their secret sex lives. This was the era when the cold war was at its coldest and social control was at its tightest and most extensive, with TV and Hollywood being major instruments of the repression.

The world of many of Curt McDowell's films is that world. Along with the ridicule and satire is a sense of loss. He exposes and sabotages Middle America and the shit it's fed. Existential void in the suburbs. Under the seductive appearance and good humor of his films is a heavy-duty condemnation of the hypocrisy and viciousness of the American way of love. He's a sexual rebel in a society that's schizophrenic about sexuality, simulataneously pretending it doesn't exist, perverting it for profit and perpetuating an image of masculinity that is larger than life so that, in terms of cultural expectations, Everyman is automatically a failure. If you define Middle America as the people who've mostly bought the shit or internalized the cultural norms, the ones who are most defined and crushed by their culture's rules, then you know stars of his films.



Blue Magic: an interview with Curt McDowell

(Reprinted with permission from *Cheap & Nasty*, ©Jenny Shepherd)

Do you have a clear idea of what you're doing when you start working on a film?
The way I work is putting stuff out to see who I am. I work things out blind. Robert says I make art out of nothing. It's always vague at the beginning. *Taboo* was started by finding the graffiti. I discover en route what it is, why I'm intrigued.

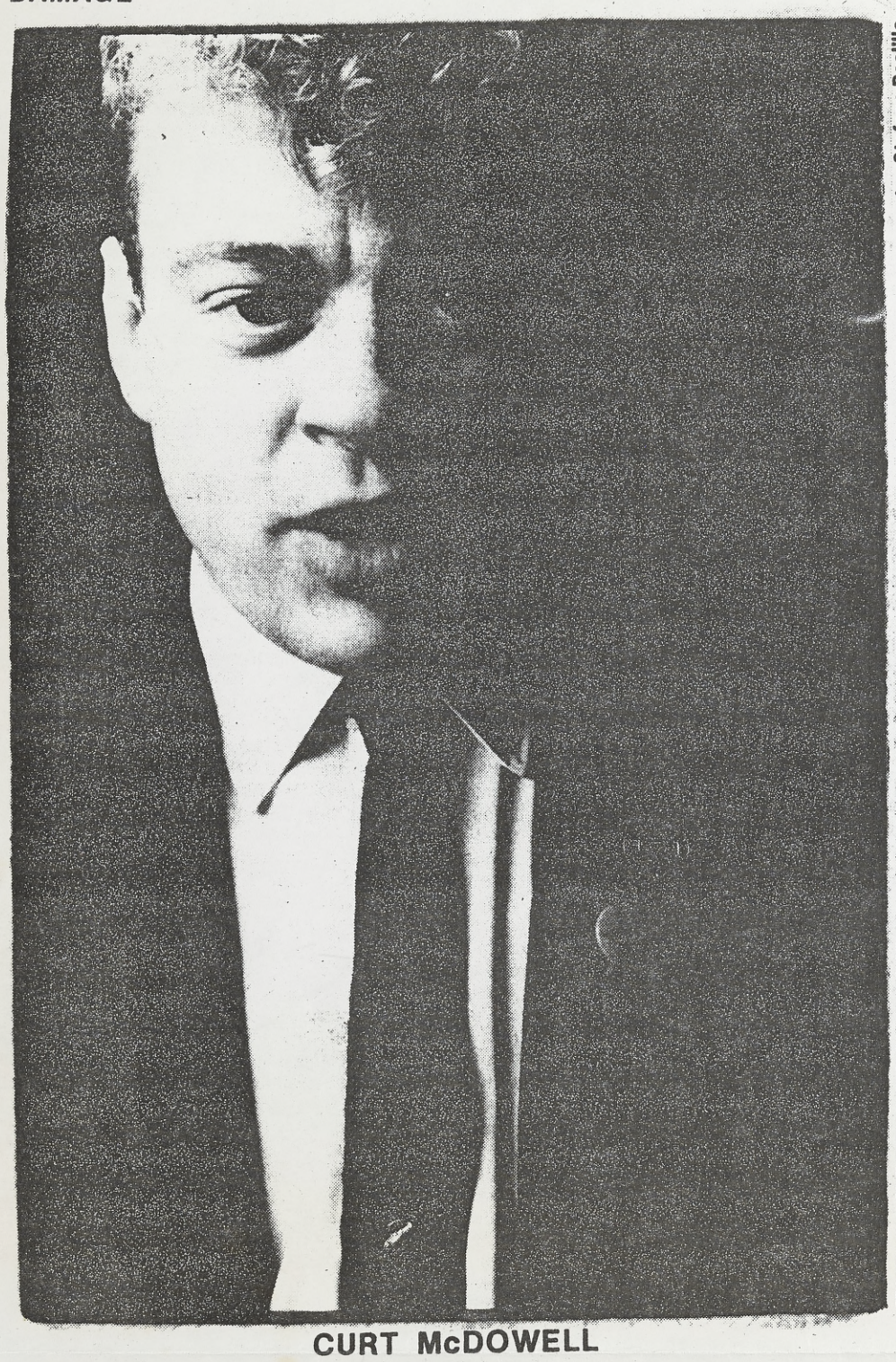
When I started making films, it wasn't like that. I was influenced by George Kuchar. People said I was an opportunist, that I was imitating him. I made a lot of films that didn't work, but I was learning what worked for me.

Like Peeing Into the Wind*? You showed me that when we were tripping.*
I showed you that when we were tripping? [laughs] I never knew what that film meant.

It seemed to make sense at the time.
After a while, I found that the films that worked were the ones that I made for myself, that showed my own fantasies. Anything else is copying things that have been done before. The ones I made for myself and that worked all have to do with sexuality and the family. The partriarchal family. My sexuality is different from my parents'. What happened was that my mother was my role model and my father the object of my desire. My family's wonderful, they understood and accepted my sexuality. In some ways, I make my films for them, to try and explain myself, although I know they won't see my films.

Do you have an idea of who your audience is? Do you make films for a mostly gay men's audience?
No, I don't want to make films that will only work for gay men. I'm interested in people who don't understand. You have to accept and believe in your own uniqueness. I get a lot of hostility from other people because they're kicking themselves for not doing it.

What's the story about finding the graffiti?
A few years ago I was in a public toilet and there was this graffiti. I didn't know what it meant and I copied it on a piece of paper. It started, "Abner L. Fuqua clears his throat and I get mad and stand close to trains or cut my eyebrow off. Dorothy is Abner's wife. Abner can slap hard, like blue magic." And it goes on some more. Then a year later, I found the same story continued in another piece of graffiti in another place.



pic: Stefano Paolillo

CURT McDOWELL

Director as actor with McDowell discovery, Ainslie Pryor, in Confessions.

In *Thundercrack*, McDowell's feature-length venture into the theatre of the absurd, a storm brings eight people in the house of just such an antiheroine, a middle-aged widow who has resorted to alcoholic communion with the pickled remains of her husband (victim of a plague of locusts) and who lives in a state of bemused sexual frenzy. It's a collaboration with George Kuchar, who wrote the script, and the result is a double-edged fusion of Kuchar's sense of the ridiculous and McDowell's empathy for the characters and their situation, however grotesque and absure it may be. Marion Eaton as the widow infuses a sense of pathos and plausibility into the bizarre activities of the lonely prairie woman, and so gives the black absurdity of her character an unexpected humanity. Meanwhile, all around her the refugees from the storm extend the marooned-on-a-desert-island Hollywood convention by exchanging not only life stories but also skeletons in closets and sexual favors. It's a crazy black farce that's given an unsettling tension and depth by the addition of McDowell's and Eaton's empathetic directing and acting, and by Kuchar's grotesque and, at times, cruel script.

What else can I say? Trash movies are the genre that Curt McDowell helped create, and which has allowed him to express himself, but his sensibility goes beyond trash. His movies have all the hallmarks of trash-sense of the ridiculous, emphasis on technical/set/costume crudity, deliberate undercutting of his own effects and parodying conventions—but his films compel you to see into his and your own feelings about the subjects he exposes. He does an ax job on the patriarchal family with wit and feeling.

See his movies.

What's the rest of the graffiti?

"Dorothy and Abner are Mary Abner's mother and father. Dorothy rattles pots and pans in the kitchen. I get mad and stand close to trains or cut my eyebrow off. One time Mary Abner kicked the TV set through the wall. Abner L. Fuqua slapped her hard like blue magic. Abner L's face is a yard long from heartbreak and trouble."

At the beginning, I didn't have a clear idea of what the film was going to be about. I had fantasies about who wrote the graffiti, what it was about and what blue magic is. In the movie, Fahed wrote the graffiti about his family. Abner slaps hard like blue magic—I made him into a tyrant who's into control. That's one aspect of me. At one time, it seemed that people were always coming around waiting to be told what to do and then resenting it. So the main threads are the family, what is blue magic and who wrote the graffiti. Then there are the themes of youth and love. The movie's a slap in the face for love. It's about rules and games and patriarchal manipulation. It's everything my family brought me up with smashed into one movie.

How's Taboo *structured? I mean you never seem too much of one for linear narratives.*

The film's multi-layered: sensual, visual and intellectual. Structurally, it's a series of vignettes, like *Nudes,* which was a series of vignettes that add up to a complete experience.

But this time the characters interrelate instead of being in isolated episodes.

Yes, in *Taboo,* a story unites all the vignettes. The characters have their situation in common. Each vignette is introduced by a quote from the graffiti. The titles are ironic. They're often inappropriate for the action that follows.

Are you working on anything else right now?

I'm working on a short film called *Crying* that'll be distributed with *Taboo. Crying* starts with a shot of my mother and father on the beach. At first it's like a really candid shot of the couple, and gradually you see that the focus is my father seen from my point of view, as my father/lover.

[We pick up the interview in Curt's editing room. He plays some unedited footage. The interview proceeds in a daze of unedited scenes and soundtrack. The soundtrack's something in itself, with original music ("Het(ero)Man" and "Crying" will be released as a single, as well as being used in the film), the graffiti spoken by a man and echoed by a woman, sirens, trains, street sounds, dialogue, strange whisperings and ominous sounds. The camera work is really supple and mobile, shifting pace constantly from still, intimate shots through fast, chaotic sweeping action. There is a spooky scene where a couple is doscovered fucking in a public toilet. It's unedited, so there's no way anyone but Curt knows what's happening.]

Who's the man waiting outside?

He's her father and also her lover. People have multiple sexual roles in the film. The characters are some aspect of myself. I can only talk for and about myself. I can't talk for anyone else. Dorothy, who's acted by Marion Eaton, is the part of me that can't get enough.

It looks as if you explode yourself and then reflect the view from each part of yourself so that the characters' interaction, making the story, is somehow a complete view of yourself.

Yes, it's a Cubistic narrative. Cubism is seeing something from all perspectives, and that's exactly what's going on in *Taboo.*

It seems like you shoot all this film before you know exactly what the structure or narrative is going to be and then, when you're editing, it rises to the surface.

Yes.

Did you have a script when you started shooting?

The graffiti was the script. Then I wrote a shooting script. Do you want to see it? [He goes away] I can't find it.

Today I had a revelation. I understood the role Dorothy has in the film. That's really important because else she would have just been there. Then I realized that she's in love with Fahed, and that makes sense.

Well, I don't want to give away the story in this interview. Anyway, how's Taboo *going to be distributed?*

I've started working on setting up my own distribution company called Taboo. *Taboo* and some of my earlier films will be available.

Where from?

The address is Taboo, PO Box 014, 470 Castro St., Suite 207, SF, Ca 94114. □

Curt McDowell's films are being shown at the Roxie Cinema in SF every Friday at midnight through October.